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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC SECURITY IN LATIN AMERICA



Principal Investigator: Rachel Bowen, Political Science

Crime rates across Central America have skyrocketed in recent years, especially crimes connected to drug trafficking and street gangs. This has produced a major policy debate in several countries over the causes, consequences, possible solutions to violent crime.

The annual costs associated with violent crime account for 7.7 percent of GDP in Guatemala, 10 percent in Nicaragua, and 10.8 percent in El Salvador. In most cases, the government response to crime has been *mano dura*, or “iron fist” policing, as military and public security forces conduct sweeps of undesirables and suspected gang members off the streets.

Lost in the policy debate over crime in Central America is the violent victimization of women. Rising crime has dramatically decreased personal security, and when governments are unable to carry out basic law enforcement, women and marginalized groups are especially vulnerable. They are also the least likely to see their cases adjudicated.

Much is not known about gender-based violence in Central America. Political scientists tend to categorize it as domestic violence, not public security, while public policy analysts tend to lump it in with other types of crime. International organizations such as the World Bank include gender-based violence in their reports, but many national governments refuse to even track statistics.

In this project, Rachel Bowen is assessing the responses to gender-based violence in Central America. She is using qualitative methodology to compare the levels and types of crime as well as policing strategies in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

A grant from the Mershon Center allowed Bowen to travel to each country for two weeks to conduct preliminary interviews with people involved in the issue of gender-based violence such as officials who provide special police or prosecutorial services and NGO activists.

Bowen’s project will contribute to two types of literature on public security and feminist anti-violence, which usually do not talk with each other. It will also provide the basis for applications for external grant funds, with the ultimate goal to produce a book-length manuscript.



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